

**General Assembly**

Fifty-sixth session

Official Records

Distr.: General
5 November 2001

Original: English

Fifth Committee**Summary record of the 16th meeting**

Held at Headquarters, New York, on Tuesday, 23 October 2001, at 10 a.m.

Chairman: Mr. Effah-Apentang (Ghana)
*Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative
and Budgetary Questions:* Mr. Mselle

ContentsAgenda item 120: Financial reports and audited financial statements, and reports of the Board of Auditors (*continued*)(b) Voluntary funds administered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (*continued*)

Agenda item 124: Pattern of conferences

This record is subject to correction. Corrections should be sent under the signature of a member of the delegation concerned *within one week of the date of publication* to the Chief of the Official Records Editing Section, room DC2-750, 2 United Nations Plaza, and incorporated in a copy of the record.

Corrections will be issued after the end of the session, in a separate corrigendum for each Committee.

01-59669 (E)



The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.

Agenda item 120: Financial reports and audited financial statements, and reports of the Board of Auditors (continued)

(b) Voluntary funds administered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (continued) (A/56/5/Add.5, A/56/66 and Add.1, A/56/132 and A/56/436)

1. **Mr. Mselle** (Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions) said that paragraph 3 of document A/56/436 referred to the recommendation that the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (ACABQ) had previously made for a biennial audit of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the advantages of which far outweighed those of the current annual audit. A biennial audit would facilitate the timely submission of more audit certificates from implementing partners and would provide more time for UNHCR to implement the recommendations of the Board of Auditors. UNHCR would continue to prepare annual budgets and interim financial statements to enable Member States to continue reviewing the Office's budgetary and financial performance on an annual basis. The accounts would, however, be closed after 24 calendar months rather than 12 months, as was currently the practice.

2. Audit was an essential and important instrument by which Member States held secretariats of the United Nations organizations accountable for the responsibilities entrusted to them. One of the most important functions of the audit process was to ensure that funds provided by Member States were used as intended and that projected results had been achieved. The latest audit of UNHCR operations had revealed that it could not be ascertained from 25 certificates covering expenditures of \$77 million that the funds in question had been used in accordance with agreements concluded with the implementing parties concerned. In addition, one country had denied UNHCR access to accounting records relating to some \$3 million of expenditure by implementing partners in that country.

3. Those and other findings in the report of the Board of Auditors needed to be addressed urgently and effectively. Because of the qualified audit opinion, ACABQ had considered the option of recommending

against approval of the financial statements. However, in view of the management changes that the new United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was introducing, the Advisory Committee had recommended that UNHCR inform it by March 2002 of the progress made in addressing the shortcomings identified by the Board of Auditors.

4. The Advisory Committee had also recommended that a change should be made to the format of reporting on the implementation of recommendations of the Board of Auditors. The current reports submitted by the secretariats of the United Nations and the funds and programmes dwelt too much on internal processes, meetings held, units established and even guidelines promulgated. The Advisory Committee believed that those reports should be shorter, should be user-friendly and should describe improvements, results and the effects of implementing the recommendations of the Board of Auditors. Such information should be supplied to the Board by the audited administrations when the Board was monitoring the implementation of its recommendation.

5. **Mr. Iossifov** (Russian Federation) said that the implementation of the recommendations of United Nations oversight bodies was crucial to the improvement of the administrative and financial functioning of the Organization. Some progress had been made by the 15 organizations on which the Board of Auditors reported on a biennial basis in the implementation of the recommendations of the Board relating to the biennium 1998-1999, and six organizations had achieved significant increases in their implementation rates since the biennium 1996-1997. In those organizations where the rate of implementation had declined, efforts must be made to correct the situation.

6. The Board of Auditors should pay due attention to determining the extent to which its recommendations were implemented and the corresponding reports of the Secretary-General should include information on the results achieved. When delays were noted, Member States should be presented with a detailed and comprehensive analysis of the reasons for the delays and should be informed of the measures that had been taken and the time frames that had been established to correct the situation. The possibility of increasing the accountability of the programme managers in question should also be considered.

7. **Ms. Hesselmark** (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) noted that, for the first time, the Board of Auditors had qualified its opinion on the accounts of UNHCR, owing to uncertainty regarding expenditure incurred by some implementing partners. While UNHCR was aware of the need to improve its interaction with its implementing partners, neither it nor the Board of Auditors had any grounds for believing that the expenditure in question was in any way irregular. The problem was the implementing partners' unacceptably long delay in reporting expenditure. UNHCR had introduced a package of measures to address the situation, one of which had been to include consideration of the issue as a specific measurement of management performance in the objectives and appraisals of senior managers. Those measures had reduced the outstanding amount by 50 per cent, and the entire sum should be cleared within the next five months. At the end of that time, UNHCR would be able to determine which implementing partners had not made their accounts available to it, and UNHCR would examine the situation in the manner proposed by the Advisory Committee.

8. With respect to information technology, UNHCR had decided to suspend the development of the integrated system project and to review the overall design to ensure its compatibility with the corporate operating model currently being defined. To improve its capacity to determine the size and characteristics of the refugee population, UNHCR was upgrading the existing registration and management systems, providing expert assistance in the field through three specialized field registration experts based in Nairobi, Abidjan and Geneva, and implementing a training module on enumeration and registration in emergencies.

9. UNHCR would continue to discuss the issue of biennial audits with the Board of Auditors and would report thereon to the General Assembly. It would also strive for more results-oriented budgeting and follow-up, improve its reporting on results achieved and clarify its criteria for prioritization.

10. **Ms. Acorda** (United Nations Board of Auditors) said that the Board appreciated the Committee's understanding of the issues surrounding the qualification of its opinion on the financial statements of UNHCR. The Board's comments and proposed actions on the two requests which the Advisory

Committee had addressed to it (A/56/436, paras. 3 and 12) were reflected in the introductory statement she had made at the Committee's previous meeting. The Board noted that several speakers had supported its recommendations that UNHCR should strengthen its oversight and monitoring mechanisms at the field level and limit expenditure to the level of expected income, and had mentioned the need to implement the integrated system project expeditiously. In the light of comments made by the representatives of Norway and the United States of America at the Committee's previous meeting, the Board would assess the level of coordination of UNHCR with other organizations in decisions on project implementation. It would also address the concerns expressed regarding the need to evaluate the effectiveness of its recommendations.

Agenda item 124: Pattern of conferences (A/56/32, A/56/120/Rev.1, A/56/133, A/56/188, A/56/213 and Corr.1, A/56/261, A/56/277, A/56/293, A/56/299, A/56/300, A/56/339 and A/56/475; A/AC.198/2001/8)

11. **Mr. Bouheddou** (Chairman of the Committee on Conferences), introducing the report of the Committee on Conferences (A/56/32), said that the Committee had worked closely with the Secretariat and other bodies to draw up a draft calendar of conferences and meetings that was tailored to the needs of the Organization. It had noted with satisfaction that the Secretariat had taken into account arrangements concerning Orthodox Good Friday, in accordance with General Assembly resolutions 54/248 and 55/222. It had also welcomed the efforts made to promote more effective coordination in order to avoid the scheduling of simultaneous peak periods at the various duty stations.

12. The overall utilization factor of conference services had in 2000 exceeded the benchmark of 80 per cent for the four main United Nations offices. The chairpersons of bodies with utilization factors under that level had been contacted with a view to making recommendations to improve their use of resources, and the Committee had noted the concern expressed by the chairpersons of intergovernmental bodies about the methodology used to calculate the utilization factor.

13. The Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) had recommended that the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services should work with the Committee on Conferences to identify demands for conference services and adjust servicing capacity accordingly, limit the duration of meetings

and draw up guidelines for meetings. The Committee on Conferences had endorsed guidelines for the limitation of the duration of meetings, as noted in paragraph 33 of the report.

14. The conference-servicing facility in Nairobi would soon become an integral part of the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services. The number of multilingual meetings held with the participation of the Nairobi team was increasing, and there had been cost savings, thanks to the establishment of the Nairobi interpretation service. The General Assembly should request the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat) to comply with the headquarters rule.

15. The Committee on Conferences had conferred with conference services managers in Geneva, Nairobi and Vienna and at Headquarters on the question of the coordination of conference services, and had noted the efforts and results of global coordination. It had also concluded that the Inter-Agency Meeting on Language Arrangements, Documentation and Publications should further promote cooperation in that field, and should put forward concrete proposals that would make it possible to share translation, interpretation, editorial and printing services among the organizations. The General Assembly should consider strengthening the oversight and supervisory functions of the Committee on Conferences so that it could be more effective.

16. There had been an encouraging trend in the utilization of conference facilities in Bangkok and Addis Ababa, and the Committee on Conferences had advocated the sharing of experience and expertise between the Secretariat and the regional commissions. The percentage of requests by regional and other major groupings of Member States for meetings with interpretation services that had been met had risen steadily, from 84 per cent during the period 1999-2000 to 90 per cent during the period from July 2000 to June 2001; for all four major duty stations, 92 per cent of requests for interpretation had been met.

17. In order to ensure the timely submission of documents for processing, the Committee on Conferences had recommended that an effective accountability system should be established within the Secretariat. It had drawn attention to the proposals contained in the report of the Secretary-General (A/56/300) and had called for a more extensive

analysis of the reasons for the late issuance of documentation and of the resulting additional costs. The Committee had requested the Secretariat to assess the prospects for future advances in videoconferencing and communications so as to determine whether such technology could offer solutions to the outstanding technical problems of remote interpretation.

18. The persistence of excessively high vacancy rates in language service posts at some duty stations was mainly due to insufficient staff mobility, while the fairly high overall vacancy rate for language services was attributable to recruitment problems, especially for certain languages and/or language combinations. Top priority must be given to filling the vacant interpretation posts in Vienna and Nairobi. Some competitive language examinations had produced low yields, in particular those for interpreters with certain language combinations. The Committee on Conferences had therefore recommended that the programme of in-house training for interpreters should be reinstated for an initial period of one year, and it had welcomed the inter-agency initiative to address training issues through cooperation between the United Nations and other international organizations and educational institutions. A comprehensive review of productivity standards in the language services should be carried out in the light of ongoing technological innovations.

19. The Committee on Conferences had expressed support for the recommendation made by the Committee for Programme and Coordination (CPC) in paragraph 71 of its report (A/56/16) and recommended that, in future budget submissions, the section entitled "General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services" should group publishing activities with translation and editing rather than with interpretation services.

20. Lastly, the Committee had expressed concern about the growing disparities between English and the other official languages on the United Nations web site, and had requested the Secretariat to include information on the United Nations Offices in Nairobi and Vienna on the web site entitled "About the United Nations". It had requested that a report should be issued on the progress achieved in, and the impact of the re-engineering of the optical disk system.

21. **Mr. Chen Jian** (Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services) said that, since its inception, the Department had placed great emphasis on coordination. The pooling of

planning and servicing capacity among staff from different duty stations, as at the recent World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, had helped to make the use of conference-servicing facilities more cost-effective. It had also demonstrated the merits of strengthening conference services at the United Nations Office at Nairobi (UNON) and incorporating them into the Department.

22. The draft calendar of conferences and meetings for 2002-2003 also illustrated the importance of enhanced coordination. In 2002 alone, nine major meetings would be held away from established headquarters. In the interest of global management and maximum cost-effectiveness in the use of resources, the Department should build on existing practices such as workload sharing in the translation services, staff loans in the interpretation services and lateral transfers of language staff, and should devise new ways to take full advantage of the ongoing integration process. The aim was not to create a micromanaged, unwieldy monolith that failed to take local conditions into account, but to achieve economies of scale and greater complementarity and responsiveness through judicious decisions on which areas should be centralized or decentralized.

23. He appreciated the endorsement by the Committee on Conferences of the guidelines regarding the limitation of the duration of meetings. That step could immediately enhance the efficiency and improve the quality of Secretariat services, and would address the concerns of small delegations. He hoped that the Fifth Committee would favour the modest request for greater predictability.

24. With respect to documentation, compliance with the six-week rule was the joint responsibility of the relevant Secretariat departments and the Member States. The Secretariat should conduct a comprehensive analysis of the reasons for the late submission of documentation, develop an effective accountability and responsibility system and take a multifaceted approach to the problem. It was already increasing its interaction with intergovernmental bodies, establishing focal points and convening planning meetings.

25. In the past year, all the requests received for facilities for meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States, and 92 per cent of those received for interpretation at such meetings, had been

granted as a result of the proactive and flexible approach which the Department had adopted to cope with erratic meeting patterns. To coordinate the Secretariat-wide provision of conference services, the Department was considering ways of making better use of the facilities in Bangkok and Addis Ababa. Staff had been encouraged to move to duty stations with high vacancy rates, though with limited success as the Department had been unable to offer effective incentives. The introduction of jointly held examinations for different language functions would result in the establishment of pools of successful candidates who would be able to pursue flexible career paths. In view of the need for interpreters with less common language combinations, the training formerly provided to meet that need had been reinstated on a limited scale.

26. The quality of the Department's work would depend increasingly on technological innovation. However, resource constraints sometimes forced the Department to settle for what was possible, not what was desirable. Some projects, such as the electronic Documents Registration Information and Tracking System (eDRITS), had been quite successful, while others, such as the use of voice recognition software and computer-assisted translation, had had little success to date. The Department would consolidate existing projects to give priority to the promising ones and encourage exchanges among duty stations to avoid duplication and share benefits. The project on remote interpretation was very promising, but a host of factors, such as technical feasibility, cost-effectiveness, the quality and availability of services, the ability of interpreters to adjust to a new way of working and the physical and psychological impact on the staff, must be taken into account in preparing future steps in that direction.

27. **Mr. Blinder** (Director of the Information Technology Services Division), introducing the report of the Secretary-General on the re-engineering of the optical disk system (A/56/120/Rev.1), said that a project had been launched in early 2000 to re-engineer the optical disk system on the basis of up-to-date technology, non-proprietary standards, a standard Internet browser and standard disk media storage. The new system had started operating in June 2001 and all documents existing on the old system had been copied onto the new one. On 4 September 2001, the old system had been permanently shut down and the staff

resources shifted to undertake the remaining development work of phase 2, which was expected to continue until the end of November 2001. The parallel operations of phase 2 were expected to start in early December 2001 and the production operations in early January 2002. The re-engineered optical disk system would have full multilingual support and users would be able to conduct search operations in any of the six official languages, in line with the policy of ensuring parity among the official languages. The new system, known as the Official Document System was central to the Organization's information technology strategy and would remain a key vehicle for external and internal information delivery.

28. **Mr. Damodaran** (Editor-in-Chief of the United Nations Chronicle), introducing the report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of recommendations regarding the United Nations Chronicle (A/56/339), said that, in the context of its consideration of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1998-1999, the General Assembly had decided in resolution 52/220 that the Chronicle should be produced four times a year in all the official languages of the United Nations. Pursuant to the Assembly's decision, the Department of Public Information had undertaken to produce a pilot edition in each of four languages, Arabic, Chinese, Russian and Spanish in order to assess comprehensively the costs and feasibility of resuming regular production of editions in those languages, which had been suspended in 1996 in the context of unavoidable cost-cutting measures. The Department's experience in producing the pilot edition through an external contractor suggested, however, that the edition would lose its value because of the lengthy period of time required for typesetting, proof-reading and layout.

29. With the advent of the Internet, the entire format of the publication had changed. It was no longer a record of events but a forum for discussion of relevant issues. The publication continued to attract contributors of stature and eminence, including heads of State and Government, United Nations and other officials, leaders in civil society, non-governmental organizations, scholars and artists. There were two possible ways of resuming publication in the six official languages. The first option was production through external contractors on the basis of secure financing that was adequate to the task of ensuring the greatest possible parity in quality and timeliness

between all editions, and the second option was to co-publish the Chronicle in Arabic, Chinese, Russian and Spanish with an outside publishing house in a format and of a quality consistent with the English and French versions. The publishing house would market the Chronicle commercially and at the same time satisfy the Organization's internal needs. Resources in the amount of \$1.3 million had been proposed for the production of the publication under the first option, but discussions on the cost of the second option were still continuing.

30. **Mr. Mselle** (Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions), introducing the related report of the Advisory Committee (A/56/475), said that the Advisory Committee welcomed the innovation by which the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services had, at no additional cost, replaced the traditional paper-based management system for the coordination of the submission of documentation with a computerized database application. It encouraged further development of the system and urged author departments to comply with General Assembly resolution 55/222.

31. The Advisory Committee had noted that, in 1996, owing to the financial crisis of the Organization, the Department of Public Information had decided to suspend publication of the Arabic, Chinese, Russian and Spanish editions of the Chronicle and that, in the context of its consideration of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1998-1999, the General Assembly had decided that the Chronicle should be produced four times a year in all the official languages of the United Nations. On the basis of information from the Secretariat, the Advisory Committee recommended that a critical assessment be undertaken by the relevant intergovernmental bodies of the utility of the Chronicle in general, including an analysis of the demand for the Chronicle in the various languages, the merits of its distribution online and the method of its publication and printing.

32. The Advisory Committee welcomed the progress that had been made in the re-engineering of the optical disk system and encouraged the Secretariat to continue to work towards unrestricted and free access to the system for all accredited non-governmental organizations. The availability of the system should be advertised as widely as possible, at United Nations

Headquarters and regional offices, as well as in the United Nations information centres.

33. On the question of remote interpretation, the Advisory Committee reiterated its encouragement of the continued exploration of the feasibility of large-scale remote interpretation, which was an application with enormous potential. The technical problems that had been encountered were not insurmountable; the Secretariat should intensify its efforts to find solutions to those problems as well as to issues pertaining to the working conditions of interpreters, and should submit a progress report on the question to the General Assembly at its fifty-seventh session.

34. The Advisory Committee recommended approval of the training initiative for interpreters for an initial period of one year, subject to the submission to the General Assembly at its fifty-seventh session of information on the results of the training activities, the continuing need for the programme and related financial arrangements.

35. In a related matter, the Advisory Committee requested that information should be provided to the Fifth Committee on the comparative costs of commercial translation and current arrangements for contractual translation at the United Nations. Relevant information should also be provided concerning the experience of Member States in that field. The question of assuring quality control must also be addressed.

36. On the subject of remote translation, the Advisory Committee reiterated its recommendation that the Secretary-General should consider a system-wide approach to the most efficient use of remote translation to reinforce capacity, as well as its opinion that further investments in that technology should be made and that its implications with respect to staff deployment should be analysed.

37. **Mr. Lemaire** (Belgium), speaking on behalf of the European Union, the associated countries Bulgaria, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Turkey, and, in addition, Norway, said that the European Union attached particular importance to the optimal use of conference services and facilities, the quality of which must be consistent with the high level of the Organization's work. It also attached great importance to strict compliance with meeting hours, the limit on the duration of meetings and the limitation on speaking time. Documents should be issued in

accordance with the six-week rule and submitted in a timely manner by the originating departments. The Secretary-General should take the necessary measures to ensure compliance with those provisions. In addition, intergovernmental bodies should, when planning their meetings, take into account the arrangements concerning Orthodox Good Friday, as provided for in General Assembly resolutions 54/248 and 55/222.

38. The European Union was concerned about the persistence of excessive vacancy rates at certain duty stations and urged that measures be taken to remedy that situation, including the implementation of General Assembly resolution 55/258.

39. A major impetus was needed in the area of remote interpretation, which could provide an answer to the recurrent problem of the excessive travel costs of interpreters. The Secretary-General should continue his efforts in that direction and make systematic use of new technologies to assist interpreters in adapting to new working conditions. In particular, an exhaustive comparison should be made between the cost of remote interpretation and the cost of traditional interpretation methods. The European Union was surprised at the lack of information on the development of remote translation, videoconferencing and voice recognition systems, areas in which a major impetus was also needed. It welcomed, however, the successful implementation of the electronic documentation retrieval system. The Union also attached great importance to the development, updating and enhancing of United Nations web sites in several languages.

40. Lastly, the European Union wished to explore the possibility of restructuring the Committee's consideration of the current agenda item.

41. **Mr. Mirmohammad** (Islamic Republic of Iran), speaking on behalf of the Group of 77 and China, welcomed the inclusion in the reports of the Secretary-General of meeting statistics for United Nations bodies and regional and other groupings, including statistics for meetings held at the United Nations Office at Nairobi. He noted with satisfaction that the overall utilization factor of conference services in New York and at Geneva, Nairobi and Vienna in 2000 had exceeded the 80 per cent benchmark.

42. The Group of 77 and China welcomed the establishment of the Division of Conference Services

and of a permanent interpretation service at the United Nations Office at Nairobi; it was the only United Nations centre in the developing world and should be accorded the same status as other United Nations centres elsewhere. Greater efforts should be made to increase the capacity and utilization of conference-servicing facilities at Nairobi and the remaining vacancies for the posts of interpreters should be filled expeditiously. The Group of 77 and China concurred with the conclusions and recommendations contained in paragraphs 50 to 53 of the report of the Committee on Conferences.

43. The chronic problem of the late issuance of documentation was a cause of concern. Departments must comply with the 10-week rule for the submission of documents for processing so as to eliminate the negative impact of late submission on timely issuance. The Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services should also improve coordination with author departments with a view to identifying and resolving the constraints that gave rise to a low rate of compliance with the six-week rule. It was a matter of particular importance to small delegations, which needed ample time to consider reports. The Group of 77 and China endorsed the conclusions and recommendations contained in paragraphs 100 and 101 of the report of the Committee on Conferences.

44. The level of resources that had been proposed for the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services for the biennium 2002-2003 was inadequate. The capacity of the Documents Control Section, in particular, needed to be strengthened to enable the Section to coordinate the processing of documents more effectively. In that connection, the Group of 77 and China noted with interest the conclusions and recommendations contained in paragraphs 93 and 94 of the report of the Committee on Conferences.

45. While the Group of 77 and China agreed that priority should be accorded to meetings of the Charter and other mandated bodies, it wished to stress the importance of providing full conference services, in particular interpretation, to meetings of regional and other major groupings; such meetings were crucial to the smooth functioning of the Organization. To that end, further efforts should be made to increase the percentage of requests met for provision of interpretation services for meetings of regional and other groupings of Member States held in New York,

including the implementation of some of the recommendations contained in paragraphs 86 and 87 of the report of the Committee on Conferences.

46. **Mr. Jalang'o** (Kenya) said that his delegation wished to associate itself with the statement made by the representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran on behalf of the Group of 77 and China. He welcomed the improved coordination of conference services at the various duty stations as demonstrated by the increased utilization of the conference centres in Addis Ababa and Bangkok. In that connection, his delegation supported the proposal for the conversion of one of the large conference rooms in Bangkok from its current fixed-seating layout into a multi-purpose room with a flexible seating arrangement in order to meet the needs of non-United Nations users and thus further enhance the utilization of the Bangkok centre. He called for the provision of the \$273,000 necessary for such a modification.

47. His delegation endorsed the measures proposed in the report of the Secretary-General on excessive vacancy rates in language services at some duty stations and issues relating to the recruitment of language staff (A/56/277). The introduction of streamlined procedures for the lateral transfer of language staff, together with in-house training, would help to address that problem. His delegation was particularly concerned about the high vacancy rates in the English and Arabic booths at the United Nations Office at Nairobi (UNON) and wished to know how that situation currently stood.

48. He expressed appreciation for the efforts of the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services to increase the utilization of the conference facilities at Nairobi. The restructuring of the administration, the establishment of a new Division of Conference Services and the steps taken towards the creation of a permanent interpretation service at UNON were most welcome. There had already been an increase in the number of meetings held in Nairobi, confirming its potential as a venue for United Nations conferences and other intergovernmental meetings. He noted, in that connection, that UNON had successfully hosted the spring 2001 session of the Administrative Committee on Coordination.

49. Regrettably, major meetings of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) continued to be held outside Nairobi. His delegation supported the

recommendation of the Committee on Conferences that the General Assembly should request UNEP and the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements to comply with the headquarters rule and to hold all their meetings at the United Nations Office at Nairobi. Persistent non-compliance with that rule was contrary to the spirit and purpose of resolutions 54/248, 54/249 and 55/222, in which the General Assembly had urged increased use of the conference facilities at Nairobi. In resolution 55/222, the Secretary-General had been requested to consider improving and modernizing the conference facilities at the United Nations Office at Nairobi in order to accommodate adequately major meetings and conferences and to report thereon to the Assembly at its fifty-sixth session, through the Committee on Conferences. He would like to know what the status of that report was. Lastly, he urged the Secretary-General and the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services to continue to explore all possible ways of increasing the use of the conference facilities in Nairobi and to bring them up to the level of those at the United Nations Offices at Geneva and Vienna.

50. **Mr. Kendall** (Argentina) said that he welcomed the decision of the Committee on Conferences to change the procedure regarding the participation of observers in its meetings, since the increased participation of observers would enrich the debates. He supported the Committee's recommendation that time limits should be instituted for the submission of documents by the Secretariat, as a means of ensuring that the best possible use was made of conference-servicing resources and facilities. He was pleased that the utilization factor for the United Nations Offices in New York, Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi had exceeded the benchmark of 80 per cent; one way to achieve such improvement was to start meetings on time. The General Assembly should be kept informed of progress made in the area of coordination, particularly with respect to the servicing of meetings held away from established headquarters and technical advances.

51. He was concerned about the low rate of compliance with the six-week rule for the submission of documentation. That perennial problem could be solved through the establishment of a suitable accountability system. The Secretariat should provide the General Assembly with an analysis of the problem and possible solutions. With respect to remote interpretation, he supported the conclusions in the

report of the Secretary-General (A/56/188) and wondered whether that alternative was economically viable in the light of a comparative analysis of current communications costs. He was concerned about the continued high vacancy rates in language posts at some duty stations, which could be remedied only through the provision of adequate incentives for increased staff mobility. To ensure the availability of qualified language staff, the General Assembly should consider raising the ceiling on annual United Nations earnings for retirees. Lastly, he was concerned about the disparity between the information available on the United Nations web site in English and that available in the other official languages. That situation must be rectified to guarantee equal treatment of all six official languages of the United Nations.

52. **Ms. Sun Minqin** (China) said that her delegation wished to associate itself with the statement made by the representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran on behalf of the Group of 77 and China. She noted with appreciation that the services provided by the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services had contributed to the success of the recent special sessions of the General Assembly on children and on HIV/AIDS.

53. She expressed satisfaction that the 2000 utilization factor for the four main United Nations offices overall had exceeded the benchmark of 80 per cent and that the percentage of requests met for meetings with interpretation in New York by regional and other major groupings of Member States had risen from 84 per cent in the period 1999-2000 to 90 per cent in the period from July 2000 to June 2001. She was concerned, however, about the quality of interpretation and translation. Despite the efforts made by the Department, errors and omissions by translators and poor interpretation continued to hamper the work of delegations. There was a need for a comprehensive monitoring system to ensure that promotions were based on performance, and there must be zero tolerance for staff members who lacked responsibility or were indifferent about the quality of their work. Training programmes should be instituted for underperforming staff.

54. She was pleased to note that the Department intended to continue implementing cost-saving measures, including improved control of resources budgeted for temporary assistance for meetings. Although she understood the need to hire freelance

staff, she was concerned that some were not sufficiently familiar with the work of the United Nations, while others were simply not up to the job. Her delegation wished to have data on the number of freelance staff hired and on the cost-effectiveness of temporary assistance.

55. The principle of equal treatment of all six official languages must be implemented in earnest. She wished to know, in that connection, why the Publishing Service at the United Nations Office at Geneva employed editors for all the official languages except Chinese. Noting that the web sites in Arabic, Chinese and Russian had been maintained through the use of general temporary assistance funds, she asked whether the Secretariat had implemented the General Assembly's decision, in resolution 54/249, regarding the conversion of the related positions to established posts.

56. The conference facilities at the United Nations Office at Nairobi must have the same status as the other United Nations conference centres. She was pleased to note that those facilities were becoming an integral part of United Nations conference-servicing resources, and she trusted that the proposals of the Committee on Conferences for their further enhancement would be implemented.

57. **Mr. Laptinok** (Belarus) said that the reports before the Committee provided a clear picture of the situation with respect to the delivery of conference services, without which the General Assembly and other important intergovernmental bodies could not function. The related report of the Advisory Committee (A/56/475) contained many sound recommendations that would improve the work of the Secretariat in the areas under consideration and should be implemented in a timely fashion. The suggestions made during the Committee's consideration of the item should also be taken into account. The proposal mentioned by the representative of Kenya concerning the conversion of one of the large conference rooms at the United Nations conference centre in Bangkok from its current fixed-seating layout into a multi-purpose room with a flexible seating arrangement was of particular interest.

58. The time had come for the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services to make greater use of such new technologies as videoconferencing and remote interpretation. The introduction of voice recognition software would

expedite the preparation and issuance of documentation in all six official languages.

59. There was a need to address, as a matter of urgency, the excessive vacancy rates in language services at some duty stations. The Advisory Committee had made a number of useful recommendations in that regard. It was not reasonable to criticize the work of the language services when everyone knew full well that they were understaffed.

60. In addition to providing information on the calendar of international conferences, which was easily accessible through the Internet, the United Nations Chronicle should report on the participation of Member States in those forums. He was convinced that such a shift in focus would win the Chronicle a wider readership. The use of external contractors to produce the Chronicle would be cost-effective and, he trusted, would facilitate its simultaneous publication in all six official languages. The Department must however ensure that the principle of equitable geographical representation was respected.

61. **Ms. Bentley-Anderson** (United States of America) said that the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services had to perform a delicate balancing act in meeting the needs of Member States and discharging its mandate while remaining within its budget. In 2001, the Department had failed in that most fundamental task and was expected to exceed its budget by \$8 million. The resources available to the Department had increased considerably, yet there continued to be chronic problems with the delivery of services which could not be addressed by simply providing more money.

62. Several factors had led to the overspending in 2001. The Department had had to service a number of special sessions. It had been able to accommodate the extra work, but at some cost to its other activities. She wondered whether so many special sessions were needed. The Department had also had to pay staff members overtime because meetings had not ended on schedule; those costs represented a significant proportion of the overexpenditure. In addition, the Department had had to engage expensive contract employees to supplement its own staff. Finally, there continued to be serious problems throughout the Secretariat with the timely submission of documents; that meant that the Department had been unable to produce documentation for meetings on time and, as a

result, some bodies had had to extend their sessions, incurring greater expenditure.

63. She welcomed the Department's proposals regarding the introduction of new techniques and changes in existing working methods in order to address the problems. The Committee should, in turn, support the Department's request for changes in the way delegations worked. She noted with satisfaction that the upgrading of the optical disk system would ensure equal access in all the official languages of the United Nations; that would greatly increase the amount of information available to delegations and, eventually, to the public. The Committee should make the relevant technology available to all current users immediately and at no cost. The use of technology, while not a panacea, could in many cases improve service delivery. The Department must therefore be given the freedom to explore technological solutions to its most difficult problems and to determine through testing whether new technology was suitable for use.

64. Her delegation could not support the level of resources proposed for the Department for the biennium 2002-2003. It believed that with discipline on the part of Member States and the introduction of the proposed changes in the Department's working methods, the Department could function effectively at the current level of funding.

The meeting rose at 12.10 p.m.